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Ask Dr. Joe: Welcome to Flu Season

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By Capt. Joseph McQuade, family medicine physician and director, public health, Naval Hospital Jacksonville



The flu season creeps up on us just as the kids get back to school. Seasonal epidemics of influenza occur every year in the U.S., beginning in the fall. Typically epidemics cause thousands to tens of thousands of deaths and about 200,000 hospitalizations.

Since the 1940s a vaccine has been available to prevent influenza—unfortunately, even with the recent H1N1 novel flu epidemic many patients don't take the time to get the vaccine. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that everyone six months of age and older receive the influenza vaccine. This recommendation has the potential to save thousands of lives.

Here are a few of the more common questions I've heard about the flu this year.

Q: What is the flu, anyway?

Influenza (flu) is a virus that infects the nose, throat, windpipe and lungs. It is highly contagious, spread from person to person by coughing, sneezing or talking close to another person. Shaking hands is also a common way to transmit the virus. Influenza epidemics occur usually between October and April every year.

Q: What are the symptoms of the flu?

Typical flu symptoms include fever, chills, muscle aches, congestion, cough, runny nose and difficulty breathing. Other viruses can cause symptoms similar to influenza, but influenza is

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more likely to cause severe infections leading to pneumonia, especially in the elderly and the immunocompromised. H1N1 flu causes severe infections in younger patients, especially in young pregnant women and children. Because influenza is a virus, it can't be successfully treated with antibiotics.

Q: If I got last year's vaccine, why do I need to get another vaccine this year?

The vaccine this year is different from last year's vaccine. The vaccine this year contains protection against the H1N1 strain as well two other novel types of influenza virus.

There are two different kinds of flu vaccine. One type can be given to healthy patients between age two and 49—its flu mist, an intranasal vaccine which can be squirted into your nose. The flu mist actually works even better than the shot for children. The injectable vaccine (flu shot) is given to pregnant moms, diabetic patients, asthmatics and anyone with any chronic medical condition such as emphysema.

Smokers are at especially high risk for influenza and should be in line just behind pregnant moms and diabetic patients for their vaccines.

Q: Is the vaccine really safe—can pregnant moms and small children feel safe getting the shot this year?

Yes! The shot is safe for pregnant women at any time during pregnancy. Since babies are not able to get shots until age 6 months, mom's shot is baby's best protection. Breastfeeding also helps protect baby—protective flu antibodies appear in mom's milk about two weeks after her immunization.

The flu shot can cause some redness and pain at the injection site, muscle ache, and a low grade fever—but because the virus is completely inactivated it cannot possibly cause influenza. The flu mist can cause mild congestion and a runny nose, but it cannot grow in the lungs and cannot cause pneumonia.

The flu vaccine ranks 6th of the top 30 preventive medicine actions a doctor can take for their patients. I encourage patients to ask their doctor questions about vaccines and consult reputable medical websites, such as the CDC at www.cdc.gov/flu/.

Patients should contact their primary care physician or local health care facility for more information on receiving flu vaccinations.

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